

NEWS

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Texas Man Pleads Guilty to Fraud Charges for Attempting to Defraud Atlantic City Casinos

(More)

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CAMDEN – A Texas man pleaded guilty today to a two-count Indictment for transporting counterfeit cashiers checks with face values totaling over \$127,000 to Atlantic City and negotiating at least one of them at a casino, U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie announced.

In addition, Joseph Portier, 37, also pleaded guilty to a one-count Information from the Middle District of Alabama, which charges Portier with possession of firearms by a previously convicted felon.

Portier pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Jerome B. Simandle to one count each of wire fraud, interstate transportation of counterfeit securities and possession of firearms by a previously convicted felon.

At his plea hearing, Portier admitted that in October 1998 he participated in a scheme to defraud various casinos in Atlantic City by passing counterfeit cashiers checks. Portier admitted that on Oct. 17, 1998, he presented a counterfeited cashiers check made payable to “Jonathan Billard” in the amount of \$55,000 to the Tropicana Casino and Resort. Portier represented himself as Jonathan Billard and presented a Texas drivers license in the name of Billard to a Tropicana employee as proof of his identification, he admitted. Portier admitted the drivers license was fraudulently obtained.

Portier admitted the cashiers check presented to the Tropicana was purportedly drawn on “AmeriNational Bank” in Houston, which was a fictitious entity. Furthermore, Portier admitted that the cashier’s check included the routing number of Chase Bank Texas in San Angelo, Texas. The cashier’s check also included a fraudulent telephone number that could be used to confirm the validity of the check, Portier admitted. Portier admitted that when he presented the check to the casino, a Tropicana employee called the telephone number in order to confirm the validity of the cashier’s check and that a co-conspirator answered the call and represented that the AmeriNational cashier’s check was valid. As a result, the Tropicana accepted the cashier’s check and provided Portier with \$55,000 in casino credit, he admitted. Later that day, Portier made a withdrawal of the \$55,000 casino credit in the form of cash and a cashiers check, he admitted.

Portier also admitted that on Oct. 17, 1998, he presented another counterfeit AmeriNational cashiers check in the amount of \$55,000 to an employee of the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort, again using the name Jonathan Billard. After a Trump employee attempted to validate the check by calling directory assistance in Houston to obtain a telephone number for AmeriNational, the casino refused to accept the check, Portier admitted. He then took the check and left the Trump casino.

Portier admitted that a few days later, on October 22, he attempted to pass another counterfeit cashiers check with the stated face value of \$8,500 at the Claridge Casino Hotel. This cashiers check was drawn on another fictitious entity – “Southwestern National Bank” in Los

Angeles, Portier admitted. Portier admitted that after a Claridge employee called a fraudulent phone number listed on the check to verify the validity of the cashiers check, he was detained by security officers from the Claridge until the police arrived. After his arrest, police found a second counterfeit cashiers check drawn on the fictitious Southwestern National Bank, in the amount of \$8,500. Portier also admitted that he told police that the checks had been printed on a friend's computer in Houston.

As for the Portier's plea to a felon in possession of firearms charge out of Middle District of Alabama, Portier admitted that on Jan. 26, 2006, he was pulled over by officers from the Mckenzie Police Department while driving a black Cadillac Escalade, in Mckenzie Ala. Portier admitted that at that time he possessed two firearms – a Smith & Wesson .357 revolver and a Maverick 12 gauge shotgun – in the Cadillac Escalade. Prior to possessing the firearms on that date, Portier had been convicted of a possession with intent to distribute cocaine in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, he admitted.

Portier was a fugitive on the federal charges in the Districts of New Jersey and Northern District of Georgia until his arrest on the gun charges in Alabama.

Count One charging wire fraud carries a maximum penalty of 20 years and a fine of \$250,000. Count Two charging interstate transportation of counterfeit securities carries a maximum penalty of 10 years and a fine of \$250,000. The one count of felon in possession of a firearm carries a statutory maximum prison sentence of 10 years and a fine to \$250,000.

In determining an actual sentence, Judge Simandle will consult the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges that take into account the severity and characteristics of the offense, the defendant's criminal history, if any, and other factors. The judge, however, is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence.

Parole has been abolished in the federal system. Defendants who are given custodial terms must serve nearly all that time.

Christie credited Special Agents with the FBI's Atlantic City Resident Agency, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Leslie G. Wiser, Jr., in Newark, for investigation of the case.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorney Diana V. Carrig, of the Criminal Division in Camden.

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Defense Attorney: Lisa Evans Lewis, Esq. Asst. Federal Public Defender